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Statement for House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia
Hearing: Promoting Peace? Reexamining U.S. Aid to the Palestinian
Authority
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Thank you Chairman Chabot and Ranking Member Ackerman. I am prepared to provide the Subcommittee a strategic overview of U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority, and discuss how it relates to U.S. national security interests in the Middle East.

This Administration believes that achieving comprehensive Middle East peace is in the national security interest of the United States. The Administration has worked ceaselessly to achieve a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement based on the core concept of two states for two peoples: Israel as a Jewish state and homeland for the Jewish people, and Palestine as the homeland for the Palestinian people. A just, lasting, and comprehensive peace between Israel and her neighbors is central to American interests and goals in the Middle East, and it has been an objective of every U.S. Administration dating back to President Harry Truman.

To that end, we have been working intensively with the parties to resolve the issues between them through direct negotiations and, simultaneously, supporting the Palestinians in their efforts to create robust institutions and a viable economy – essential to a future Palestinian state that will be a responsible neighbor and contribute to regional peace, security, and stability.

Our efforts to support Palestinian institution building are critical to preparing the ground for a successful and stable peace. And they remain critical even as progress on the political track has proved difficult to achieve. This Administration, like those before it, has been clear – permanent status issues between Israel and the Palestinians must be decided through direct negotiations between the two sides, not at the United Nations. We will continue to strongly oppose efforts to resolve these issues at the UN or other international organizations.

Our assistance to the Palestinian people is guided by this paramount U.S. interest of achieving a comprehensive Middle East peace, which in turn promotes regional stability and undermines extremists. We strongly believe that building Palestinian government institutions and a viable Palestinian economy serve these interests and are essential for peace, the stability of the region, and the security of both Israel and the Palestinians. Our programs have focused on helping the Palestinians build transparent, accountable, and credible institutions of government that will enable stability and sustained economic growth; they have also been essential to building professional and dependable security forces that have gained the trust of both the Palestinian people and Israeli counterparts.

As you know, institution building is a long, arduous process that needs consistency and a long-term commitment if it is to succeed. Our assistance to the Palestinians dates back many decades and has long enjoyed bipartisan support. I have been involved in different aspects of our

assistance for the Palestinians for over two decades, starting when Ronald Reagan was president. In the Administration of President George H.W. Bush, our assistance supported the Palestinian people as we first began direct negotiations after the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in 1991. Under the Administration of President Clinton, we began to support the Palestinian Authority that was set up after the first Israeli-Palestinian agreements were signed in the 1990s. Under President George W. Bush, we began a program to provide security assistance to the Palestinian Authority, with the creation of a United States Security Coordinator in 2005 to train and equip Palestinian security forces that could begin to assume law and order responsibilities. President Bush also authorized the largest aid package to the Palestinian Authority in U.S. history. President Obama has continued this effort in his strong support for this security assistance program and for our extensive development and humanitarian programs for the Palestinians.

We are helping the PA to improve public services, increase the capacity of their justice sector, put in place critical infrastructure, and meet urgent humanitarian needs. These activities are designed to help the PA to meet essential needs and to offer an alternative to those who reject a two-state solution and exploit human suffering to radicalize the population and recruit supporters.

I would like to provide just one example of the impact of our security assistance on peace and stability. U.S.-trained Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) have worked effectively with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to counter the mutual threat of terrorism, and have maintained calm in the West Bank even during periods of tension, including the recent May “Nakba Day” and June “Naksa Day” protests. While there was violence on the Blue Line with Lebanon and in the Golan along the Disengagement Line with Syria, in the West Bank U.S.-trained Palestinian Authority Security Forces maintained order in coordination with Israeli forces. Their professionalism has been praised by the Government of Israel and the IDF. I recently returned from a visit to Israel and the West Bank and had the opportunity to meet with both Israeli and Palestinian officials. The Israeli security officials I met with confirmed that Palestinian security efforts in the West Bank remain robust, even following the recent reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah. And Palestinian officials assured me that this would remain the case regardless of political developments. We will continue to monitor the situation closely to ensure that this remains true.

Our justice sector assistance, which complements the security assistance program, has increased the effectiveness and fairness of the criminal justice system by providing training to Palestinian judicial and prosecutorial institutions and has solidified gains made by the Palestinian security services in combating crime and terrorism in the West Bank.

Our economic support has been equally critical to our objectives. Our budget assistance to the Palestinian Authority has been key to ensuring that the PA can continue progress on reforms and provision of services to its people. Due to the PA’s unique interim status, the Palestinian leadership lacks control of its future borders and many of its population centers, which limits its ability to manage its own economy or collect tax revenues. While the PA has increased revenue collection in areas under its control dramatically in recent years, more progress is needed before

the PA will be self-sustaining. Additionally, our assistance gives us strong leverage both to encourage the PA to continue the real progress it has made to date enacting fiscal reforms and to work with other governments to fulfill their commitments of support to the PA.

We strongly believe the continuation of U.S. assistance is key to supporting a Palestinian government prepared to make peace with Israel. Nevertheless, as President Obama made clear, the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement “raises profound and legitimate questions” which Palestinian leaders will have to answer. The President has been clear that Israel cannot be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction. The United States will continue to demand that Hamas accept the basic responsibilities of peace, including recognizing Israel’s right to exist and rejecting violence and adhering to all existing agreements.

Since the agreement was signed in May, however, key issues remain unresolved between the two sides. In the meantime, the existing government under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad remains in place, and they continue their efforts to build institutions and ensure security. If a new government emerges, we will evaluate it carefully, and our assistance will be guided by all relevant U.S. law. Let me be clear: in this assessment, the Administration will ensure the full implementation of U.S. law. But as of now, nothing has changed in terms of Palestinian Authority governance or affairs on the ground in the West Bank – the PA government, headed by Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad, remains in place.

President Abbas has made clear that he and his government accept the Quartet’s principles: a commitment to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of all previous agreements and obligations. Prime Minister Fayyad’s government continues to make progress in building the transparency, accountability, and security that will be essential to an independent Palestine that can live in peace and security alongside Israel, and as such deserves our continued support.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that our assistance to the Palestinian people is an important building block of our efforts to achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East that will allow all people there – Israelis, Palestinians, and others – to live their lives in peace, in dignity, and in security. The United States plays a critical role in the cause of Middle East peace because it is consistent not only with our values, but with our national security interests as well. On behalf of the Administration, I thank you for the opportunity to brief you on this program, and for your support for these efforts.